“On the Poet’s Trail”

Footsteps fall softly
Following the path
Of Japan’s haiku master.

In Fall of 2007, novelist Howard Norman followed the journey made by 17th-century Japanese poet and writer Matsuo Basho and immortalized in his *Oku no Hosomichi—Narrow Road to a Far Province*. This article details Norman’s exploration of Basho’s life and the reasons this literary giant undertook his journey.

By Howard Norman

Photographs by Michael Yamashita

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“Each day is a journey, and the journey itself home,” the poet Matsuo Basho wrote more than 300 years ago in the first entry of his masterpiece, *Oku no Hosomichi, or Narrow Road to a Far Province*. The words are on my mind as I prepare to walk in the footsteps of this revered poet, along his narrow road—the 1,200-mile route he followed through Japan in 1689. I confess that even to imagine doing so is a bit daunting. My late friend Helen Tanizaki, a linguist born and raised in Kyoto, told me, “Everyone I went to school with could recite at least one of Basho’s poems by heart. He was the first writer we read in any exciting or serious way.” Today thousands of people pilgrimage to Basho’s birthplace and burial shrine and travel parts of Basho’s Trail. After three centuries his *Narrow Road*, in print in English and many other languages, still speaks to readers around the world.

Given the pernicious clamor and uncertainties of our own times, it’s easy for a modern reader to identify with the vague unease that Basho sometimes complained of. Whatever its source—Basho lived a turbulent life in a changing Japan—his melancholy was an intensifying element in much of his writing and an important part of what, in the end, propelled him on his journeys.

Few details are known about Basho’s early life, but he is thought to have been born in 1644 in the castle town of Ueno, southeast of Kyoto. His father, a minor samurai, may have earned his keep teaching children to write. Many of Basho’s siblings probably became farmers.

Basho, however, acquired a taste for literature, perhaps from the son of the local lord, whose service he joined. He learned the craft of poetry from Kigin, a prominent Kyoto poet, and early in his life was exposed to two lasting influences: Chinese poetry and the tenets of Taoism. After his master died, Basho began spending time in Kyoto, practicing a form called *haikai*, consisting of linked verses.

In Basho’s time, the first verse in *haikai* was evolving into a poetic idiom of its own—haiku, whose unrhymed phrases of five, seven, and five syllables are meant to capture the essence of nature. Basho published his first haiku under various names, each having some personal significance. One, Tosei, or “green peach,” was a homage to the Chinese poet Li Po (“white plum”).
In his late 20s Basho moved to Edo (now old Tokyo), a newly established city in great social flux, with a fast-growing population, robust trade, and, for Basho, literary opportunity. Within a few years he had gathered the coterie of students and patrons who formed what came to be known as the Basho School.

In 1680 one of his students built the poet a small house near the River Sumida, and soon after, when another presented him with a stock of *basho* tree (a species of banana), the poet started writing under the name that has endured: Basho. Credible accounts of his life hold that during this period he was plagued with spiritual doubt and took up the study of Zen Buddhism. His despair only deepened in 1682, when his house burned to the ground in a fire that obliterated much of Edo. He wrote:

Tired of cherry,
Tired of this whole world,
I sit facing muddy sake
And black rice.

In 1684 Basho made a months-long journey westward from Edo, which occasioned his first travel account, *Journal of a Weather-Beaten Skeleton*. In Basho’s day travel was by foot and lodging was primitive. But despite these rigors he set out again in 1687 and a third time in 1687-1688, journeys recounted in *Kashima Journal* and *Manuscript in a Knapsack*. Both were written in a genre that Basho profoundly refined—*haibun*, a mixture of haiku and prose. The poetic travel works and the strenuous sojourns that inspired them added luster to Basho’s reputation.

Yet in the autumn of 1688, in his mid-40s, Basho confided to friends that he still felt the world was too much with him. Exhausted from the incessant demands of students and of his literary celebrity, he said that he “felt the breezes from the afterlife cross his face.” He began planning a pilgrimage to sites important for their literary, religious, or military history—places he wanted to see before he died. He intended to leave that winter, but his friends, worried about his frail health, begged him to wait until spring.

Finally, in May 1689, accompanied by his friend and disciple Sora and carrying only a backpack, writing materials, and changes of clothing, Basho set out, determined yet again to become a *hyohakusha*—“one who moves without direction.” He walked for five months through the uplands and lowlands, villages, and mountains north of Edo and along the shores of the Sea of Japan. It was this wonderfully episodic sojourning that produced his masterwork, *Narrow Road to a Far Province*. “It was as if the very soul of Japan had itself written it,” said the early 20th-century Buddhist poet Miyazawa Kenji.

The book is a spiritual journey, synonymous with taking a Buddhist path, shedding all worldly belongings and casting fate to the winds. But the physical journey had a practical side: Basho
made his living in part as a teacher, and as he traveled, any number of far-flung disciples were happy to host the master and receive lessons in poetry.

In 1694, the year of Basho’s death, the famed calligrapher Soryu wrote in an epilogue to the Narrow Road: “Once I had my raincoat on, eager to go on a like journey, and then again content to sit imagining those rare sights. What a hoard of feelings, Kojin jewels, has his brush depicted! Such a journey! Such a man!”

In the intervening centuries, Basho has become many things to many people—bohemian sage, outsider artist, consummate wayfarer, beatific saint, and above all a poet for the ages. In his Narrow Road, Basho seamlessly plaits together self-deprecating humor, logistical detail, Buddhist compliance, painterly description, and even raunchy complaint (“Fleas and lice biting; / Awake all night / A horse pissing close to my ear”). At the same time, his book provides a kind of timeless spiritual map for the traveler. Helen Tanizaki once characterized Basho this way: “He’s like a quirky philosopher tour-guide who pretty much leaves readers alone to experience traveling in those remote places for themselves. Rather than trying to account for things, he just feels the obligation to take note of them, a vast striving for connection.”

As I put on my own raincoat and prepare to walk in Basho’s footsteps, I harbor no delusions that I am about to travel through an ancient Japan like that of the Narrow Road. As the scholar Donald Keene reported, “Each place it describes is totally transformed. Senju, the first leg of Basho’s journey, is now a bustling commercial district, and Soka, where he spent his first night on the road, contains a mammoth housing development. But the truth of The Narrow Road ... will survive such changes.”

Former poet laureate Robert Hass paraphrases Basho this way: “Avoid adjectives of scale, you will love the world more and desire it less.” Following that admonition, I have neither large nor small expectations. I do know that even today, eternal landscapes and age-old shrines can be
found along Basho’s route, connecting an open-minded traveler to the past in ways no human industry can impede. Besides, beauty is found not only in what you observe with compassionate perspicacity but also in how you come to know yourself when alone. Meandering along farmland roads on foot or riding in a car in 21st-century Japan, staying the night in a traditional inn near mount Gassan or in a business hotel in Tokyo, I will seek refuge in the indispensable idea of Basho.

Basho is said to have told a student that he often “held forth” with great Chinese and Japanese poets of the past, calling one such occasion a “conversation with ghost and ghost-to-be.” For over a year now I’ve been thinking of my journey as a kind of portable séance, an ongoing dialogue with Matsuo Basho. I will pray for decent weather (I’ll be traveling during typhoon season), good moon viewing, and quiet hours to fill notebooks. And step by step I will happily define myself as a ghost-to-be.

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**More Haiku by Matsuo Basho…**

Summer grass.
All that remains
of warrior’s dreams.

Old pond.
A frog jumps in.
The sound of water.

Let me show you,
you market people,
this hat filled with snow.

Just butterflies
and sunlight
in the whole empty meadow.

On a withered branch
a crow has settled.
Nightfall in autumn.